

# BENT BARS PROJECT

a letter-writing project for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, gender-variant, intersex, and queer prisoners in Britain



## Newsletter 5 - Summer 2014

### Welcome to the Fifth Bent Bars Newsletter!

February 2014 marked Bent Bars' 5th Birthday! Over the past 5 years, we have heard from so many people inside and outside prison walls. We are proud to still be doing this work, as this is not always easy for a small, grassroots, self-funded and completely volunteer-run project!

Thanks to everyone who has been a part of Bent Bars – it's all of you that make this project incredibly special. We receive many letters every week that let us know how important the project is for prisoners. We want to thank all of you who have shared your experiences, insights and stories with us, and also

want to acknowledge those who have much to share but can't or feel unable to contact us. We look forward to more years of connecting LGBTQI communities inside and outside prison!

For those of you who are new, the Bent Bars Newsletter is written for and by prisoners who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, gender non-conforming, queer or intersex (LGBTQI) as well as friends and supporters.

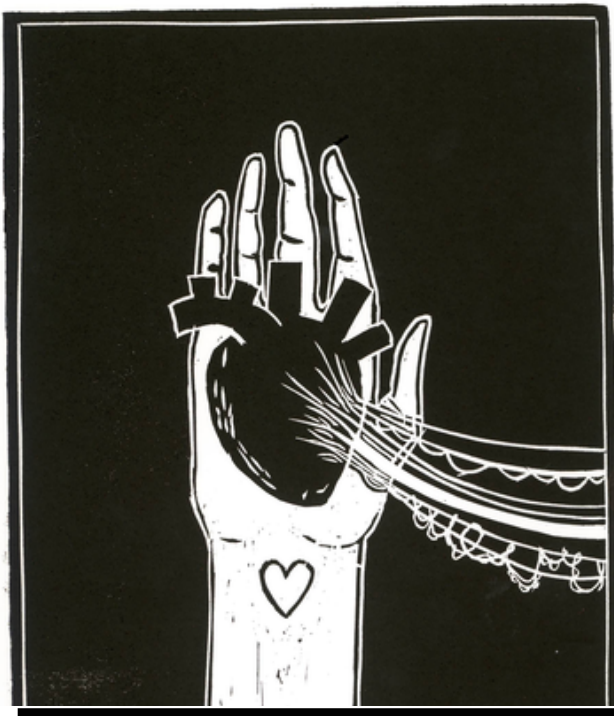
We aim to open up a space for LGBTQI prisoner voices to be heard and for prisoners to have the opportunity to share experiences with one another.

In this issue you will find letters, poems and articles under the theme of 'identity outside the box'. We wanted to know how you, our readers, describe your identities and whether your self-identities match the ways that other people or even society might see you.

We asked if you felt your identities have changed over time and if so, how. As always, we received fabulous contributions that exceeded our expectations and provide some wonderful reading.

Thanks for all of your contributions! Happy reading.





Heart Hands and Strings by Maddy Young

# Identity 'Outside the Box'

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## Identity

Identity what's it all about?

Well let me tell you it's not about being put in  
The categories of being lesbian, gay, bi or trans.  
It's not even about feeling male, female or both.  
Maybe you do have multiple identities that leave you  
Feeling that you don't fit neatly in some kind of box.  
I can even see how one's gender may not fit with their  
Sexuality.

But identity as put in the Collins English Dictionary  
Is the characteristics that make you who you are and  
Whilst this may be high on the agenda for many people  
It's your qualities that should count. After all you  
Can't change your identity. You will always be  
Who you are and be proud of who you are.  
But you can always change your qualities  
And make who you are a better person.

~ Nigel

## Dear Bent Bars Project,

I have only recently become aware of Bent Bars and the amazing work you do and after reading your last newsletter decided to share my experience with everyone.

I have been openly gay since I was 14. I am now 21, and never had an issue being 'out'- that was until I came to prison. I spent the first 9 months of my sentence in YOI's. As soon as I went in I knew I couldn't be myself. There was such stigma around homosexuality in young offenders that even the slightest hint that someone was gay opened them up to a whole world of issues. I hated not being myself, having to hide behind a mask. It didn't make my time any easier because I was constantly battling with myself. This wasn't who I am, why should I change just to please others. I was so scared of the consequences that I refused to be myself.

Shortly after my 21st birthday I was released and subsequently recalled. This time to an adult jail. Automatically my guard went up again. I hated it, even more. I hated hiding who I am. Eventually I had to tell someone. There was only one guy I trusted at the time and after much deliberation I told him. I was rather shocked when he responded that he was as well and just like me hadn't told anyone. He became a massive support to me. He introduced me to the GBT group and that's when I decided enough was enough. I am who I am and I should be proud of it. I stopped denying being gay when people asked and was surprised at how much respect I got from people by being

honest. The guy I first told has since become my partner and we are both now 'out' and open about our relationship. We get the odd remark here and there but the majority of people respect us for who we are. We now plan to start a life together upon our release and are currently fighting to get a cell together while in custody. Coming out in prison was a big step but I'm glad I did it.

Until all are free



we are all imprisoned

To everyone out there struggling with their sexuality in prison, there is support, you're not on your own and don't be afraid of who you are, it's part of what makes you you. The GBT group here at my current prison is amazing and has been an amazing help, I can't thank them enough.

My best wishes to everyone out there especially those struggling as I did.

~ Karl x

## Down South

Just a memory in the corner  
Of my mind,  
Human contact left far behind,  
A smile,  
A cuddle,  
Your laugh, your touch,  
That I loved so much.  
For a second or two I think  
Of you,  
Locked in my room at night with  
Nothing to do,  
But you're just a memory in a  
Corner of my mind left far behind.

~ Anonymous

## **Heartache**

When I wake up I feel so alive  
But in my heart I have died  
But if I died I would feel so alive  
But in my heart I still cry

My heart is tough but also soft  
It's like my brain is thinking of pain

My life is like a skyscraper  
It goes up and down like an elevator

The memories that never die  
But keep alive inside  
Some are good  
But more are bad  
The more I think the more it hurts

~ Terry



## Dearest Bent Bars,

You asked for views on living with labels or being placed into boxes. Labels don't define us, however labels can be helpful: they offer us a sense of belonging into a community or a family. But also they can be damaging especially the labels that others uninvitingly stick on us. The worst thing we can do to ourselves is start carrying others' negative labels around with us. When we think of labels we automatically only think about the unhelpful ones.

However, there are a lot of labels and traits that we possess that we should be proud of. Before becoming prisoners we were partners, we were, and still are, someone's son or daughter, someone's daddy, someone's mummy. People labelled us as kind, generous, loving, supportive. We mustn't forget these labels, so why is it that when someone shouts to us across the prison yard "battyboy", "ladyboy" or all these other words some ignorant person feels they have a right to call us, we let these go straight to our core and invoke all those negative feelings within us? We automatically forget all those loving labels that were given to us by our loved ones.

People will always try to put each other neatly into one box or another. That's how it helps them process incoming information. But it's up to us to find our own oxygen supply within that box, to survive, if we don't we will suffocate in there. We shouldn't let others restrict our breathing - we must live and breathe freely. Not carry the weight of labels and boxes around with us.

Those of us who are a bit stronger should assist, help encourage those, we see around us, that are being choked by sectors of our ignorant society.

~ Abz



## Dear Bent Bars,

From about 13, I knew I was not the same as all the boys at school, as it was an all-boys school back in the 70s. I looked at boys at games and in the showers but they never looked at me. At about 15 all my mates had girlfriends but not me. At 16 I was away with mum and dad for a day out by the sea - at 16 mum and dad let me know go all on my own, so I did I was going along the beach tossing stones into the sea and then a stone came from over my head. I look back to see and to have a go and there was a boy. I said to him you could have hit me - he said sorry. Anyway I look at him: it was just like it was back in school. We walk along the beach doin' what boys do. It got to be about 4 pm and I said to him, I have to go.

On the way back we were by the beach huts and he pushed me in to the gap, as I fall I grab his coat and we fall. He was on top of me in the gap, and then he just kissed me. I was a bit taken aback, but then I just kissed him back, then we kiss and kiss and before we knew it was 5:30 PM and it was time for me to go. We got back to my mum and dad and well we just said good bye and that was that. It was like the night went on, I knew I was gay. In the car on the way home, I have to say to mum and dad what I did, but it would not come out. I have for over 40 years never got them words out, till I got in to prison.

In 8 months no visits, no letters - I guess my family do not want to know. But from day one in prison, I said I will not hide: I can be a bisexual man. About a week in to my time, there was 3 men in the queue for tea and they was goin' on about this gay man putting him down calling him a batty boy and lots more. And then the light came on again, and I just said oh is that right? By the way I am gay. They just looked at me and I was bearing it. I got my tea and went back to my cell. About 15 minutes later

one of the 3 men was at my door. I said hi, what can I do for you? He did not say anything, he just looked at me. I say come in so he did for about 2 minutes he did not say anything, just looked at me. Then he said boy you got some balls doin' that. I said thank you, then he said I am gay, I said well done mate, with that he was off. On association he was back for over 1 hour, we sit and gas about me and him what life is like being bisexual. The next day he went his way and so did I. He knew I knew and the same for me.

I am at a different prison now. We have a LGBT group, but as a lot of you know by goin' to see them, within days the whole wing knows. I am ok with that as a bisexual man with a wife and kids living in South London you have to be a man's man but no more. I now make a point of telling all that want to know me that I am bisexual and if they do not like it, don't let the door hit your ass on the way out.



In 8 months of coming in to prison 5 men have come out to me. That made me a better man knowing I have helped them. I say to people who I am and what I am. That does not mean I want to jump in bed with every man I see. In 8 months of being in prison not one man has pushed my buttons. I do hope it will stay that way you have to have a lot to deal with in prison and taking a lover may be the wrong way for some, it is not what I want, I am keeping my love for someone when I get out.

Well to end I would say to all: be strong, be yourself. If you are asked the big question, are you gay? It will be up to you what you say. All I know is saying yes I am gay to people has made me a free and better man. I am free at what people think I am. I will never go back to hiding in the cupboard.

So good luck with your sexuality and your time.

All the best,  
~ K



## He

(Have you ever sincerely loved someone that didn't know that you existed, or had any idea how you felt about them?)

At first glance he was my Heathcliff, his form svelte, well sculpted and muscular. Upon entering the carceral gates clad was he in prison garb and shackles. His facial features well-seasoned, characteristic of some love master in a romance novel.

T'was late in my bunk, the prison grapevine at rest, I'd dream of him. Held to my visage his T-shirt laden by his manly odours. My heart thumps, longing for his embrace, longing for a jailhouse courtship that would never be. Each day my heart torn from my chest as I watch him play his jailhouse role.

Tattoos of barbed wire and skookum roses festoon his biceps and chest as he pumps iron in the bullpen.

For he does not know how I feel. All I want is to tell him "I Love You" yet I dare not say, I hurt in my silence behind these walls of stone. Night after night I lay in my Bunk alone. What does he dream of at night? He too must be forlorn.

Now he has gone, gone to another stockade. All I have left is a creased photo of him, my Heathcliff, my beloved. Sometimes in the night, in the silence I swear I hear his voice, I turn to my side and smile, knowing he is out there... somewhere.

~ Seth



## Stress Relief

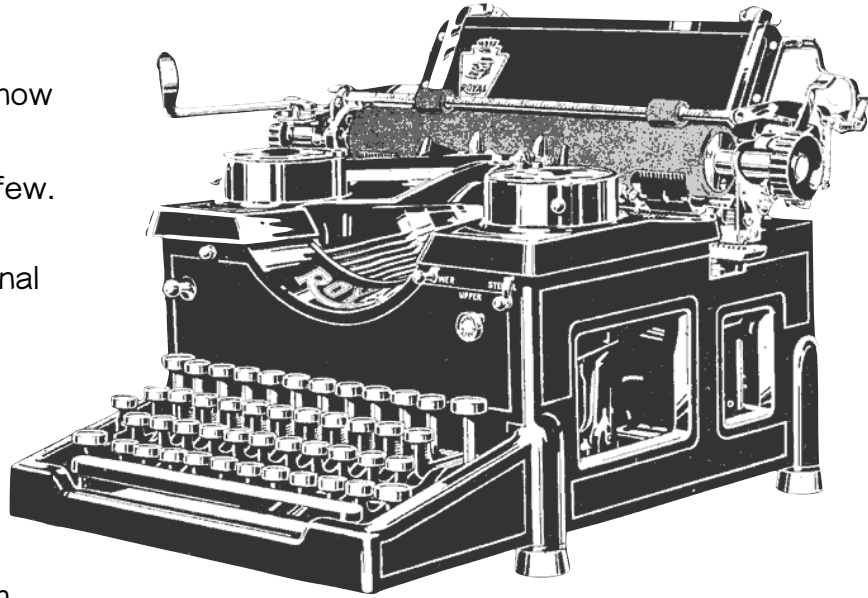
There are a lot of negative ways to express how you're feeling - being violent, shouting, screaming and breaking stuff just to name a few. All of which, on reflection, leave you feeling even more stressed out. Why not try emotional expression through creativity?

There are a lot of different ways to be creative. They all can help to get things off our chest and reduce the anger or sadness we might be feeling. Some people (me being one) find writing their thoughts down on paper can help look at things in a different perspective. When you pick up the pen, and start to write, what comes out will not necessarily make sense. That kind of confusion is better out than in.

There's no need to show others what you have written. Not everyone prefers to share their writing with others - you can keep it private. However asking someone to read what you have written is a good way of sharing your emotions, feelings and thoughts. On paper, there is no need to hold back - you just write what comes into your mind. There's no risk of your ground's leave being taken, or you ending up in the obs lounge. I see writing as a window that I open in my mind, just as those birds in the sky; I let my imagination wander freely.

Writing is not everyone's cup of tea. Maybe painting is? You don't have to be a master artist as Van Gogh, or Monet, as long as you are able to move a brush on paper or canvas, then you're expressing yourself. It's called abstract.

The act of filling a page of canvas, with the use of colours, images and shapes helps us express emotion that we find difficult to talk to others about.



If you're thinking writing and painting sound so boring, then why not try other activities that still offer you freedom from stress and anxiety. Such as listening to music, dancing, playing games on your computer, or you could do light exercising. It will get your heart rhythm pumping and your body releasing those happy chemicals called endorphins.

Believe me they work better than any illegal substances that I have taken, to induce feelings of euphoria. When you feel naturally high, you feel a lot calmer and less angry, sad or stressed.

I wish I resorted to these healthy practises, when I was growing up, instead of solvents, alcohol and drugs, to cope with the tensions and pressures of life. If nothing else, I would have at least saved myself from sitting in front of psychologists for hours on end. Explaining, well trying to, all the alternative uses for mushrooms, air fresheners and bicarbonate soda.

~ Abz

## Hi brothers and sisters,

I am a pre-op transsexual prisoner serving a life sentence for attempted murder of another prisoner. I came to prison in 1988 and at first, the prison staff would try to accommodate me letting me shower separately from other prisoners and I had a single cell. One day, whilst showering, three prisoners entered the shower room and beat me up. Kicking me in the head and punching me was something that I could handle as I was no stranger to physical abuse.

I am becoming so institutionalised that I am not really interested in prison anymore.

I live with the PSI 07/2011 [Guidelines on the Care and Management of Transsexual Prisoners]; the Diversity Officer and Governor have allowed me to wear my female clothing when I am on my wing, which is almost completely full of vulnerable prisoners. They have advised me that I should wear gender neutral clothing when I am off the wing as the staff could not guarantee my safety.

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“My life seems to be full of dramas. It was awkward trying to explain to the staff the importance of having tights as they said I could not have any.”

Being called a freak and being told that I deserved to die is what really hurt me. The prisoners then slashed me with razor blades and stabbed me. I managed to escape the shower room and soon discovered that someone had paid the prisoners to hurt me. The advice that I was given was to ‘man up’. Like a fool, I started to act as I thought alpha males would act. When someone threatened me, I retaliated immediately. It was after another prisoner thought it would be amusing to bully me that I retaliated by trying to strangle him. Thankfully, he lived and since that moment, I have been filled with shame for what I tried to do.

Trying to be someone else instead of myself has resulted in me now being in prison for 24½ years. I just got a knock back on my parole and

My life seems to be full of dramas. It was awkward trying to explain to the staff the importance of having tights as they said I could not have any. After delicately and assertively saying that they played an important part in helping me maintain my modesty and dignity, they changed their minds and one battle was over before I started to get my knickers in a twist. The next drama is that I am having tremendous difficulty in being referred to a psychiatrist who specialises in gender dysphoria. The healthcare provider in this prison feel that they are not obligated to make the referral. I feel trapped and helpless at the moment and scared that I’ll not be able to meet the requirements of the gender recognition panel. My heart really goes out to any girls out there who are experiencing these same difficulties and any advice would be gratefully appreciated.

My next drama is about me trying to get to a prison where I can live full time as a woman as I desperately want a gender recognition certificate. I often feel overwhelmed by my situation but take solace in the fact that my

family and friends know about my desire to transition. I have a large support network and I realise how lucky I am. I often get teased when I am walking about on my wing, wearing my make-up, wig and dresses. I don't care what other people think and I hold my head high yet remain willing to talk to the other prisoners. I am always being asked questions about my sexuality and plans for the future. I have no secrets and I'll answer any questions. I knew that life would be difficult, but as each day passes, I am becoming more confident, my self-esteem is increasing and my sense of humour is returning. I am still learning to love myself and I hope that I one day will be a very happy woman.

At work, I dress as a man. On the wing, I live as a woman. I must confess that this does distress me and I feel as if I have a split personality. By agreeing with the staff that I should not dress as a woman when I am off the wing, I feel that I have betrayed myself and the other transgendered girls in the British prison system. Changing identities is very confusing, especially as I keep changing the pitch of my

voice to sound more manly when I am at work. At the end of each weekend, I also scrape the nail varnish from my fingers and I cry every time I do it. I feel like I imagine a female feels and think as I imagine a female thinks. I am

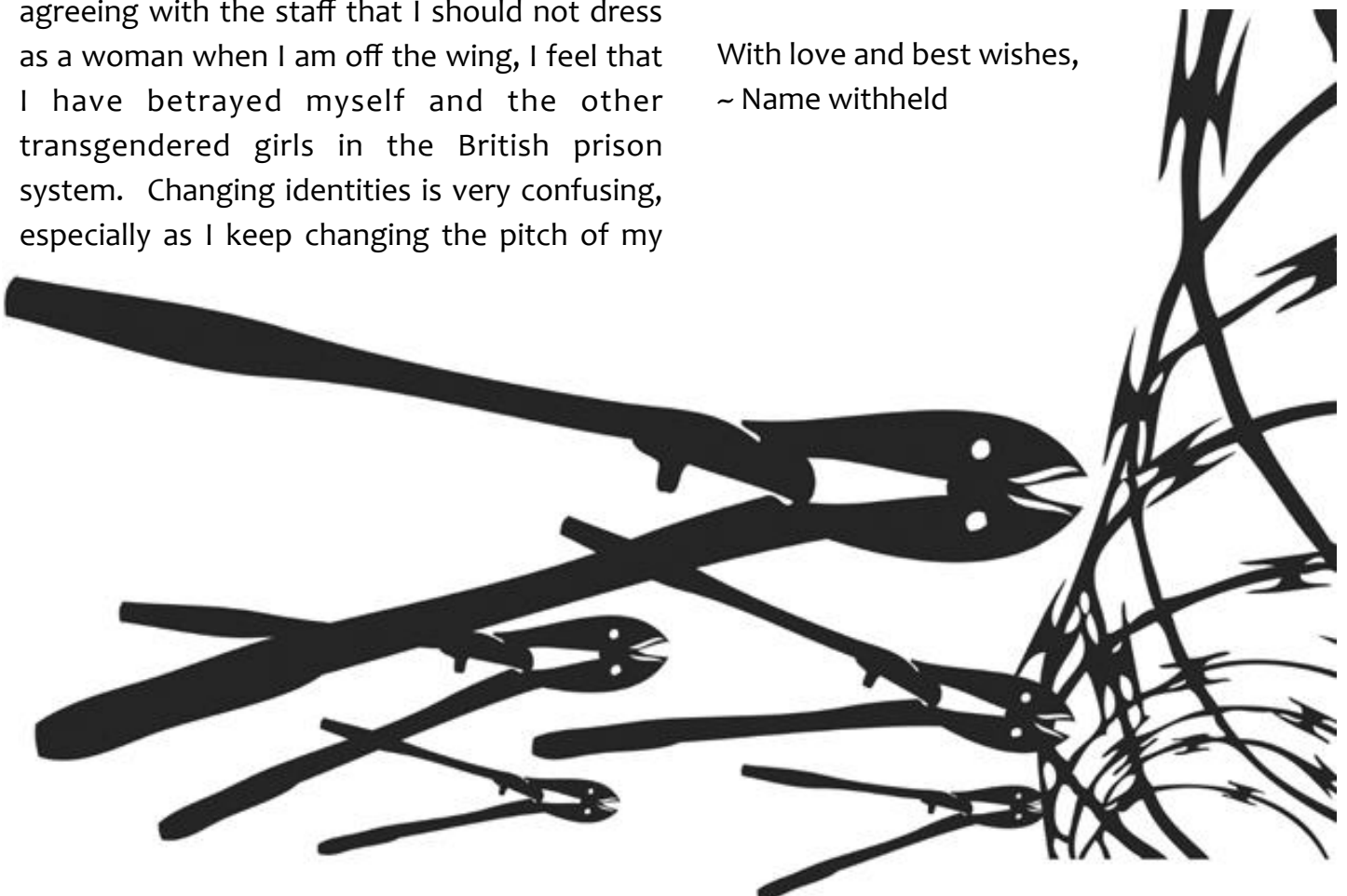
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“I am becoming more confident, my self-esteem is increasing and my sense of humour is returning. I am still learning to love myself and I hope that I one day will be a very happy woman.”

proud of being labelled as transsexual and earn for the day that everyone will identify me as a woman.

Until that day, I will continue in my struggles, remain focused and hope that all of you out there will end up with the great life that we all deserve.

With love and best wishes,  
~ Name withheld



BISEXUAL

TRANS

QUESTIONING

INTERSEX

QUEER

TRANSSEXUAL

FEMALE

LESBIAN

GENDER QUEER

GAY

ASEXUAL

MALE

So, what is “Gay” anyway? Some people say it’s a gene we’re born with, others say it’s a life choice and, there are even some that say it is the work of the Devil! Me, I’m not really into labels, so I don’t refer to people as Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Trans or Queer. All of those are words that have been accredited to our kind for as long as the human race inhabited the earth.

Why are we never just referred to as ‘Michael’, ‘Claire’, ‘Chris’ or ‘Donna’, the names we were given at birth? Upon being introduced to new people I am regularly referred to as “Michael, my Gay friend”. Or if someone is referring to me, to someone else I have been “That Gay Mike” or “That’s Mike, he’s Gay you know”. Why? What has my sexual orientation (or the label thereof) got to do with whom I am being introduced to?

There are many answers or opinions I could share in response to this, but the one I am going to respond with is that the word “Gay”, “being Gay” or knowing someone who “is Gay”, has become like a fashion accessory in today’s society. And I for one am sick of it. Not that I am in any way ashamed of who or what I am, I just don’t go around ramming it down people’s throats or pushing it in their faces. I just live my life in the way that I do.

Not through a choice I made, not because of a gene I was born with and certainly not because I am influenced by or possessed by the Devil!

I refer to people as people, calling them by their names and not by what makes them them! For example I wouldn’t refer to my neighbour Billy as “Billy the carpenter” or “Billy the breeder” or “Straight as a nail Billy”.

I am not “Gay” I am Michael! “Gay” is a word, I am not a word I am a person!

People think that me being “Gay” has moulded me into who I am today. I have often come across people who, when I have got to know them they have said that I have a good sense of humour and that I am funny. But then they go on to say “I love Gay people, they are always so funny!” Are we?

What I’m getting at here is that yes, we are often given these ‘labels’ but they are not what define us. Being “Gay” doesn’t make you any more “funny” than what being diagnosed with diabetes does.

One day, long after my lifetime, perhaps these labels will no longer exist. I certainly hope so

because with labels come stereotypes. And it's really sad because when you are growing up and discovering who you are many people adopt these stereotypes in order to fit in. An example of this is "Gay" men feel they have to wear particular kinds of clothing. And it's true, some poor adolescent or young adult believes they have to buy and wear these clothes, because "that's what Gay men do".

To conclude, I don't place people in boxes and I don't expect to be placed in a box myself. I've experienced bullying and some

threatening behaviour because I am labelled as "Gay". I doubt I would ever have been bullied or threatened if I was only ever introduced to others or referred to by others as Michael.

Much Love  
~ Michael AKA MANBAGS xxx

MICHAEL

MANBAGS

### **I Won't Change**

If they don't like me, for being gay  
Then maybe they should stay out of my way  
Even if they don't like me  
Or think that I am strange  
I do not care, and I won't change

I won't be beaten by these mugs  
I won't change a single day  
I won't listen, but ignore their comments  
And live my life, my own way

I used to dread, all the fears  
I used to hate living for many years  
I used to think about my last breath  
But I'm looking forward to my death

So let me tell you, I won't change  
And to you all, it may seem strange  
Do what you want, shouting out, then say  
That you think it's wrong, 'cause I am gay

I'm not bothered, not one bit  
Give me hell and give me shit  
Do you give a damn, do you really care  
Cause at the end of the day  
My life I won't share.



Della 15-2-2014

The poem is about a man who I was in love with until he died in jail:

### Torcher

Deprived of his touch,  
The smell of his hair,  
Deprived of the looks he gives me  
And the way he cares.

Deprived of his moods whether they  
Are good or bad,  
Deprived of comforting him whenever  
He's sad.

Deprived of his smile and making him  
Laugh,  
Deprived of his generosity and the way  
He doesn't do things by half.

But not deprived of his love whether  
He was broke or rich,  
Not deprived of his memories  
Or the feelings they evoke.

~ Anonymous from Cotswold Ward

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### From a U.S. Prisoner

Now, let me tell you about being gay while in the custody of the Department of Corrections [DoC]

If the powers that be who run the prison systems know that a person is gay, the DoC waits till the inmate is with a few days of wrapping up his bid before filing a motion in the courts system stating that the inmate is a sexually dangerous person because he's gay and should be confined in a correctional facility for the rest of his natural life.

There are many gay people in our prison system who will never admit to being gay, because they would like to get out of prison some day.

When I was in my 20's and 30's, I made the mistake of thinking that I could beat the DoC in a court of law because they had no right to discriminate against someone because of their sexual preference.

Boy was I wrong. They dragged my case out for more than 20 years. Now my new release date is sometime in the next few years, it was supposed to be ten years ago...

~ Name withheld



## **Bare Emotions**

I give heartfelt thanks  
To those who open their doors  
To accept me as I am  
In my nakedness

In this state I am vulnerable  
Like an autumn leaf  
About to fall to the ground  
Skeleton-like and fragile

But my resolve is of iron  
My intentions are focused  
Ever loving, open hearted and kindly  
To those who require my help

It is my responsibility to yield  
To my innermost feelings  
It is my destiny to find  
This scarcity of soul

Do not judge my fortitude  
In seeking my better half  
How can you know how I feel  
And what constitutes these emotions

It is of love I speak  
Deeply within my soul  
Cries of anguish, a longing  
To find a fellow being  
As honest, as true and as alone as me

~ Anonymous



**Dear Bent Bars:**

A big hello to all the guys and girls at the Bent Bars project.

Massive thanks for the pen pal you matched me with. We have been writing to each other now for the last month or so. My penpal seems really genuine and lovely, somebody I am very interested in getting to know. I hope we will become very good friends over time. I can only hope he feels the same maybe I will ask him but as ever a bit unsure of when will be the right time.

.....  
“All you have left in prison is who you are. Be true to yourself, find the strength and courage and you will be surprised by some of the reactions.”

Thanks for the recent newsletter (N#4). When I am finished with it I pass it to other gay/bi lads in the prison via our out, proud and loud group “Real Voices”. Posters with our details and an unmistakable rainbow flag. We are supported by the Diversity team and prisoner rep. Our support for the transgender ladies here has helped them fight to be able to dress the way they want and to buy makeup – previously denied to them. After all that it does bring home that you can change things – not easy by a long shot but definitely worth it, at least that’s what I think.

I am truly saddened by many of the experiences of other gay/bi/trans prisoners in your newsletter. I can only say that not all prisons are the same. I have been to 5 prisons and overall I have had very few problems, I have many straight friends and others that I

talk to regularly. Everyone knows I’m gay – the many men in pants on my notice board (including a pic of Anthony Ogogo’s brother - cute bum) pretty much says all you need to know. The staff are fine with my display and even the governor, on one of his cell inspections, said it was not a problem.

Obviously there are a few problems but then even outside there are always a few, we don’t live in a perfect world and prison isn’t perfect either. I have been surprised at the acceptance of other guys both on the main and on the VP (rule 45). Honesty is valued so

being true to yourself and to others is actually respected - at least that’s what I have found, maybe I have been lucky or maybe it’s just how I am towards others I don’t know. But one thing I do know is that “hiding in a closet” eats you up inside and makes everything else worse.

All you have left in prison is who you are. Be true to yourself, find the strength and courage — it is a scary prospect — and tell people who you are. You will be surprised by some of the reactions. I don’t however recommend running round the wing shouting I’m gay/bi or trans although I do know one guy that did exactly that and you know what nobody gave it a second look. Most of us already knew but the change in him was extraordinary, helped him to stop self-harming. Being in prison is hard enough don’t make it even worse by torturing yourselves as well.

... I hope everyone in prison and outside stays safe and plays safe!!

Take care  
Lots of love  
~ Alan

.....

## Dear Bent Bars

Thank you for your latest instalment of the newsletter – it is really interesting. I hope that my letter might encourage those who are in need, to build up the courage to be who they are meant to be.

I started my journey 2 years ago when it was hard for trans people in prison even to have clothes and make up, never mind being accepted as equal.

When I was in my last place, the PSI 07 2011 [on the Care and Management of Transsexual Prisoners] was released and I could start to be who I was – who I am – without being diagnosed with gender dysphoria. But I got scared and stopped.

When I moved to where I am now, I was seen by a governor who told me that as long as I am seeking treatment I can be treated the way I wish to be treated. So my real journey began. As I only have the prison pay to support me, the prison helped me get some clothes from a local women's prison. I now have clothes, make up and underwear which I wear full time. I am trying to build up the courage to wear make-up outside my cell but I wear my clothes.

The best part of it all is I am accepted by the majority of the prison. I am on normal location and I do not hide away – I walk around proud as punch. I don't let the small group of ignorant people get to me. I let it go over my head. The biggest thing is the amount of respect I have gained from everyone, all because I don't hide I am strong enough to show I ain't ashamed of who I really am.

Because of that reason, I say embrace who you are don't be ashamed of who you are and fight to be that person. All you have to do is take that first step.

I am the happiest I can be and look forward to the rest of my journey.

I just hope you can.

Thank you for your time.

Love and Respect

~ Tammy

P.S. If you don't have one yet, Bent Bars' pen pals are brilliant. They will help and support you in your time of loneliness. X



## Dear Bent Bars

Bent Bars is a brilliant concept and definitively confronts our identity on an issue that has proved so contentious to the prison milieu it was previously swept under the carpet. And it's smelly under there! We are lucky here at HMP Highpoint as there is an enlightened non-combative and supportive environment. Which, believe me, is not the case at every prison.

As you will be aware there has been a change in policy orientation and service tasking taking form in jails. So as a more amiable enlightened approach develops from management side to diversity here at least, the focus now moves onto work and worker training, for us offenders. This means that soon there may be dramatic drop-offs in visible funding and officer support for us non-hetero people. This may lead back to the resurfacing of potential and open hostility from some quarters! I am sure it will not, however. We live in hope we are all human beings.

Crucially Bent Bars reminds all that we are NOT ALONE. As I detailed before this is now a time of great change – in the country and also, in its prisons. Even as the country – England – debates: Europe; yes, no? England or a United Kingdom? For us in England there is a noticeable LGBT line of a shared experience that runs from Oscar Wilde and the Marquis of Queensbury through to Joe Orton, Jeremy Thorpe MP even up to Crispin Blunt MP our current Prisons minister.

I feel it is now apparent that all three major parties of government here in Blighty are committed to – at least – recognising our existence. I am hopeful this will lead to a greater shared respect for us and perhaps a lessening of the more egregious practices: legal processes and law, that can involve us. The future is positive and there is everything to play for, and win! So publish this letter, if you want, from a grateful prisoner.

With thanks,  
~ GEE



## Being Fearful: What future?

Prison and being imprisoned for my crime created a huge chasm for me. For all I could see, this was the end of my life. Yes, I had done the crime. I had really, so deeply, hurt people who mattered; I took the responsibility for my actions. I was wrong.

In that space of life called 'over the hill', around fifty years old, I was suddenly removed from wide open and free society into a tiny world in which I had no control. As with a natural canyon, there was for me a cliff edge into a deep empty space, my chasm. I was frightened.

Now I had to face the realities of my life, of my actions, and begin to find out just who I am. Just who is this person? Tell me please, because I am not sure any more about anything. I became child-like, a robot, doing what I was told. I obeyed.

For many months I kept my back to the wall. I stayed in close range of my home cell. I listened; I watched; I said very little. I retreated into myself, to protect me. As my case proceeded, there was little I could do; when it was finally

dealt with, I could begin to see. I needed help.

Being a first-timer, being older, being naïve, being scared, being gay, being ashamed, I had to learn how to live once more. But I decided if there was to be a new life, with any sense of prospect, I must become that man I always hid behind my mask. I asked for help.

My cliff edge, the lip of my chasm, shook my belief in me from doing the wrong life-thing, into beginning to understand this must change. Only I could do this: if I did, again, grasp enough belief in me I could become better in future. I made a decision.

If I honestly believed I am a gay man, then I should be that man. If I honestly believed I could change, then I should make that change. And, importantly, if I honestly believed I could again become a citizen in society, then I should shoulder that responsibility. I chose my path.

It takes time to change. But an ancient Cathedral building, or a centuries-old Mosque, or a neat tidy Synagogue, all

started their life as a single stone or block or brick being laid on the ground. With time, such single stones form a structure, a whole building. This is what I did.

It isn't easy either. I had to learn about me in re-building me. I decided I must be who I think I really am, a gay man who has made a horrible mistake. Prison really was my chasm, a place of change in my life. I did get support from many different people. They cared – really.

Leaving prison, I started my new life. It is tough, make no mistake about that. I found who I can begin to trust, those who will guide me, and when to ask for help. I needed to know that believing in me is the beginning to the change I needed. I believe in me.

Life is full of structure, having a good foundation – just like those buildings. I see what my past was but do still need to be reminded, occasionally. Today I have my gay partner, I have somewhere to live, and I have something good to do with my time. I am occupied.

~ 'Chronicler'

## Chemical Cash Cow

The pink one kept me happy on the days that I felt sad  
The red one kept the pink one from making me go mad

With the white one I would sleep and the blue made me think  
But I often thought I'd kill myself if I took it with the pink

Two green ones keep me calm and this means I do not panic  
But I never take the green ones on the days that I am manic

My orange one it had side effect it made me feel so ill  
So I told this to my doctor who gave me a yellow pill

Now I've got a rainbow which I swallow when I'm told  
And the makers of this rainbow they earn a pot of gold

~Nigel

## The House of Pain and Mending

In the house of pain and mending  
Stands a long table in the kitchen  
Where food and rage is chopped and swallowed.

There is a new baked cake  
Iced with grief  
Take a slice for everyone.

In the house of pain and mending  
Furniture and fabrics hiss and groan  
With secret hurts whispered  
Pummelled yelled communicated through the skin.

In the house of pain and mending  
Perhaps the mending like a tailor's  
Is invisible unlike the pain that screams its  
presence  
Like paint too brilliant upon a wall.

~ Nigel



When I look at myself in the mirror, I now see Jermaine, smiley, bright eyed, beautiful and I'm comfortable. However, you see something else, that camp dual-heritaged gay guy. I hate the fact that 'cause you identify me as that, you don't want to truly get to know me, but that's your issue. I won't change for you or anybody.

People that I have around me know my true identity and love me regardless. They know my struggles and demons and want to help me work out who I am, with them I stand strong and for them and myself I stay true.

A few years ago that wasn't the case. I wasn't comfortable, I feared being the true me because that's all anyone saw when I opened up to them and it hurt when they rejected my friendship. I felt so lonely, but hated lying even more.

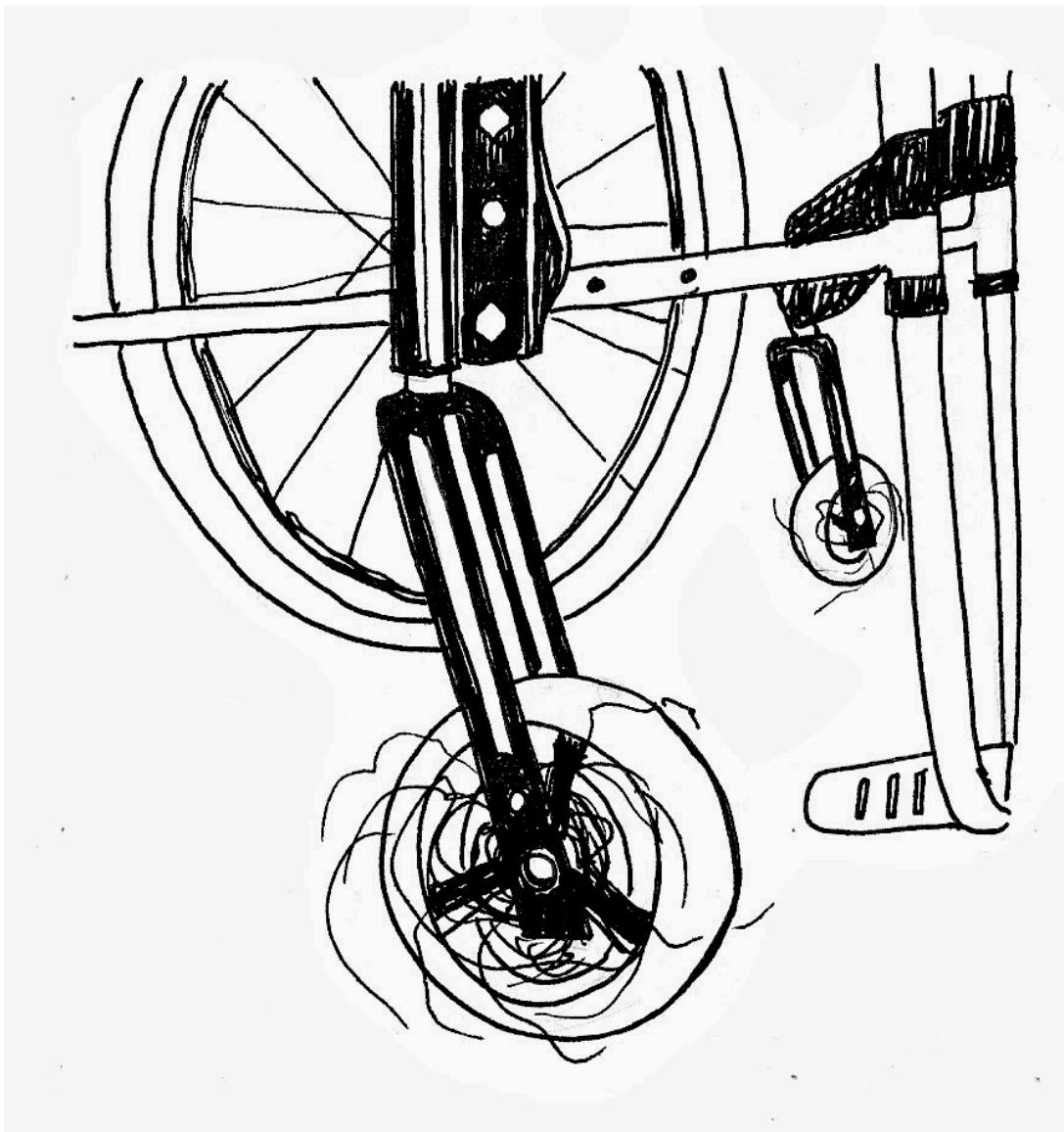
Here I am, 25 now and can see all's changed, I'm being me and loving it. I'm finding happiness 'round every corner. It wasn't you that needed to accept my identity, it was me!

**I am me, I am gay, I am camp, I am smiley, I am dual heritaged, I am true to myself, I am happy but most of all I am loved.**

I am what I am, you are what you are, and only you can change that but only if YOU want to.

I hope you all are well and wish you the best on your journey. Stay strong and love life.

Love your friend,  
~ Jermaine



“Long Haired Tomboy” by ET Russian

### Trust for me

Trust for me is sharing responsibility. It's giving up control.  
Giving up lies and believing you can change.  
It's about gaining hope where there was despair.  
It's about giving others but most importantly ourselves a chance.  
It's about opening up your heart to the deep unknown.  
Drawing a line in the sand, waking up to a new start,  
Hearing what your soul is telling you.

Without trust who are we?  
Lonely candles that flicker under the night sky.  
You have got to believe in someone but trust no one.  
Trust is a giving thing you to give to receive.  
It's in the love we give and the love we receive.

~ Abz

**Dear 'Bent Bars' team,**

I was really surprised to see in your Autumn 2011 newsletter the section on page 14 about 'Real Voices' sent in by Matthew.

HMP Littlehay was the 'flagship' establishment for 'Real Voices' set up in 2001 and this year we celebrate our twelfth birthday. Once the support group was established here we, with the help of our Coordinating LGBT and Equality Officers, were able to roll it out into 8 other establishments. I have no idea just how many establishments have now adopted 'Real Voices' but I think it is great that Matthew contributed to your newsletter because we can now see that 'Real Voices' is still going strong, and is now potentially nation-wide – yippee!

Even since PSI 07/2011 – the Care and Management of Transsexual Prisoners was implemented HMP Littlehay has really stepped up to the mark and equality here in Littlehay has reached a whole new level. More and more men here are now feeling safe enough and brave enough to 'come out' as trans and apart from the initial show and the odd bigoted remark from certain ignorant inmates our trans friends can walk around just as free as any other straight/gay or bisexual inmate. HMP Littlehay does operate a zero tolerance policy on any type of bullying or discrimination. Providing that HMP Littlehay offers the offending behaviour courses inmates need to undergo as part of their sentence plan and that it would be a progressive move for them I would say to any gay, bi or trans inmates to put in a transfer request to our 'safe haven'.

(HMP Littlehay is an adult male establishment for 21 years + and only pre-op trans-'male to female' and post-op 'female to male' inmates will be considered).

.... I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Much love  
Hugs and handbags

Xxx Michael





Jett. 10-2-2014

## My story

This story is about my own journey through the prison system, some of my experiences, some of the things I have witnessed and how they have affected me.

Ten years ago when I first came to prison it was very tough. Being open about your sexuality was pretty much unheard of. It wasn't a good idea to 'come out' back then, because you would have instantly become an easy target for bullies, who would both mentally and physically bully you for it.

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“Whenever I called my male partner on the phone or when I wrote letters to him I had to pretend that he was female”

A lot of other prisoners wouldn't talk to you or want to be seen around you through fear of being labelled gay themselves. This only made the daunting experience of prison life even more difficult. Some of the things I experienced were that some lads wouldn't come out of their cells, nor would they want to use the showers at the same time as you, and others wouldn't associate with you at all.

Through the system of S.T.Cs and Y.O.Is I had to hide my sexuality – the real me – away for years. Whenever I called my male partner on the phone or when I wrote

letters to him I had to pretend that he was female, changing his name and remembering to refer to him as 'her' instead. This made me feel very insecure. After a while it just became the normal thing to do, but that doesn't mean it got any easier. Can you imagine how difficult it was to try and explain to all the other lads who always asked: “why is your girl not coming to see you?” At one point I even had to resort to asking a lesbian friend of mine to send me a picture of herself so that I could pretend that she was my girlfriend to get the lads off my back and leave me alone.

Eventually the pressure and stress of hiding my true self away got to me and I began to self-harm by cutting myself as a form of release. I wanted it to help, but all it did was got me labelled as a self-harmer at put on an ACCT book and suicide watch. This kept me away from other prisoners and also kept me on the wing. This environment eventually became my way out. A way of not having to worry about the other lads finding out about the real me.

Since transferring into the adult estate I have found the strength and confidence to be myself and decided that I wasn't going to hide away anymore. I am now out and proud. My bisexuality doesn't define who I am - it is a part of who I am. Even though I can sometimes be the subject of homophobic taunts, I know I am safe and that I have the support I need from the

prisoner-led LGBT group and the equality team as a whole.

Sexual orientation was never thought of as part of equalities way back when I was in the S.T.Cs and Y.O.Is. You never saw a prisoner-led equality team either. To now see that my sexuality is protected under equalities legislation and in a system where prisoners support the other prisoners, especially the vulnerable ones, is great. It's also excellent that some of the straight lads are willing to help out with LGBT issues and support those who need it. This is the best thing to me because it enables us all to interact – gay, bisexual, transgender and straight people all being seen together and talking with each other.

Thank you,  
Dean



### So you know...

The Bent Bars Collective aims to include the contributions we receive as they are submitted, without making significant editorial changes to content or style (beyond spelling and grammar corrections when necessary).

However, due to space constraints some articles are edited for length. We also sometimes edit content for privacy and confidentiality reasons. If you've submitted something and don't find your writing or artwork in this or previous issues, we'll aim to include it in the next one.

Don't be shy to drop us a line to make sure we have received it!

We will not publish any material which reinforces stereotypes or expresses oppressive attitudes towards others.

The articles in this newsletter are written by people in prison and it is read by people inside and outside of prison.

Distribution is free so if you'd like a copy, just ask! We welcome all your thoughts, comments and replies to questions raised in these pages.

This newsletter was printed by the Footprint Workers Co-op in Leeds (<http://www.footprinters.co.uk/>). Bent Bars would like to thank Footprint for their ongoing generosity and support.

# Call-out for the next newsletter: “Role Models”

The theme for the next newsletter is “role models” and we would love to hear anything you’ve got to say about this subject. Please write to us with anything you want included in the next newsletter. Suggestions for this theme include:

- People that you have known in your life
- Famous people that inspire you
- Someone you really respect or admire
- Someone’s story you think about as a lesson for your own life
- Someone who has helped you face the world honestly
- Ways in which you might be a role model for someone else

These are some of our thoughts, and we would love to hear from you about this topic, or about anything else that you have to share.

We would also really love images for the next newsletter, so please send any artwork, cartoons, paintings or sketches you would like to see included (we will return your original pieces).

How to contact us:

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The Bent Bars Project is a letter writing program that connects lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, gender-variant, intersex, and queer communities across prison walls. If you would like more information or would like to request a penpal, please drop us a line.



Feel free to pass this newsletter on to anyone else who might be interested.